



Speck Tells the Story of Wisconsin Specialty Crops

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EDITORS NOTE: This is one of a series of features highlighting DATCP employees and the programs they work in.

MADISON – Many people work for years wondering how to unlock the secret to successful grant writing. Juli Speck has opened the vault; the secret is in the story.

When Speck came to the Department of Agriculture, Trade and Consumer Protection (DATCP) three years ago, she was ready to go from applying for grants to being the administrator. Now as the Specialty Crop Block Grants Manager, Speck is able to help applicants be the most effective in their application and ultimately make the greatest impact on Wisconsin agriculture.

Specialty Crop Block Grants are given by the U.S. Department of Agriculture and are awarded to projects in each state that enhance a specialty crop industry as a whole. Specialty crops include fruits and vegetables, tree nuts, dried fruits, horticulture and nursery crops, including floriculture. Last year, Wisconsin awarded nearly \$794,000 of funding to 18 recipients. Grants support agriculture by developing new and improved food safety practices, designing innovative production techniques, improving sustainability and increasing consumption of specialty crops.

Speck never imagined she would be working in agriculture but with a background in environmental studies and ecology, it is a perfect fit. She earned a liberal arts degree from Gustavus Adolphus College in Minnesota and a master's degree from the University of Wisconsin-Madison's Nelson Institute for Environmental Studies.

"I always have enjoyed learning new things, and I knew coming into this job there would be a huge learning curve," said Speck. "It has been really exciting learning new skills and knowledge of the agricultural industry."

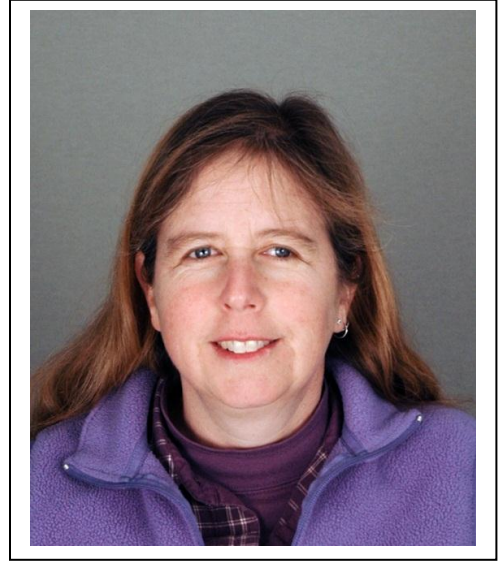
She fell into grant writing accidentally while working at the Girl Scouts of Wisconsin for twelve years. Speck started writing grants with science-specific language, and when those kept going well, she did others.

"I used to believe there must be a formula or key words I needed to write a successful grant," explained Speck. "I now know that the grant application needs to share a story about why the project is important, why the results are needed by the industry and how these tangible results will make a difference."

After Speck's first year managing DATCP's Specialty Crop Block Grant Program, she started conducting workshops to assist potential applicants during the writing process. This way she could better help applicants determine if they are eligible to receive a grant for their project.

"I am very honest with potential applicants about the likelihood of being funded or what will make the proposal higher quality. A project needs to fill an urgent need in the industry," said Speck. "By doing these workshops, I am able to level the playing field among the applicants."

Once the applications are in, the grant review has three steps: an internal panel, an external team and a final scoring. Grant projects must assist with research, bring products to new places or increase



capacity. Projects need to prove a definite result for producers. Selected projects are combined into an entire state application and submitted to the federal government.

After a grant is awarded, Speck's work is not done. Grant recipients need to complete an annual report, have a site visit and share findings with producers. Each grant needs to have an outreach component, which allows producers to learn about the research and ask questions so they can put the results to work.

Every day is different in the Specialty Crop Block Grant Program. Speck begins her work in the winter preparing the request for proposal form. Even though the Specialty Crop Block Grant is federally funded, individual states have great flexibility in how the program is administered each year.

"Each state has the ability to set priorities based on what the state needs," added Speck. "Input is collected from past recipients and solicited from industry organizations."

There is a great Specialty Crop Block Grant network among the states to share ideas such as application materials. This year, Speck is making a Wisconsin State Manual for grant recipients to guide their progress throughout the year. The manual is based on one used in California.

When asked about memorable Specialty Crop Block Grant recipient results, it is no surprise that Speck is especially impressed with two projects with environmental ties. The cranberry growers are evaluating water conservation techniques in production, and preliminary results show that with new soil testing technology, growers could see a 60% reduction in water use. The potato growers are also revolutionizing their industry by determining what irrigation will save water and money.

"The results from Specialty Crop Block Grants are long-range and can positively impact everyone in the state, from producers to consumers," Speck concluded. "When I go to a field day and listen to a grant recipient share their findings, you can see the difference on the face of a producer in the audience. I really enjoy helping the individual organizations to meet needs and make a difference."

Speck will be the first to say it is more fun on the administrative side of the grants. She will keep working to unlock more secrets to make grant applications less about the rules and more about making the greatest impact on Wisconsin's specialty crop industry.

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